

Context and Content: Beyond the Circles of Self Concern

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When I was appointed to the training post of Tenzo, or head cook at our previous monastery Zazen-ji many years ago, I was still a novice monk. I was very grateful to be given the opportunity to support the practice of the Sangha by preparing meals for practitioners and deepen my own practice at the same time. I understood some of the context of the training post, but I had concerns about it as well, which I raised with the Roshi. I dove down into some content and fished up up what I thought were treasures: memories of my previous experience of working as a chef in a vegetarian restaurant for a time, of cooking for large groups of people in other organizations I'd been a member of, of cooking for family, of being the 'woman in the kitchen' - all of this came up. During my youth, women still often as not, ended up cooking and doing the laundry. And actually that has not changed that much in the culture since then. So I brought my concerns to the Roshi and he listened patiently as I described what was worrying me. All of this really boiled down to, "But I want to practice and Wake Up. I don't want to spend all of my time being 'the woman in the kitchen'. Is that how it's going to be?"

The Roshi laughed and said, "You might be chopping onions, but you won't be 'in the kitchen.'"

Some 21 years later, and you will sometimes see me standing in the kitchen chopping onions. But that's just just a partial view of what is going on. What is really going on is that I am standing in the kitchen, in the midst of the Total Field of All Possibilities, chopping an onion. And when I look over, the Roshi is often standing there also, chopping an onion. In fact, last evening he was chopping an onion as he made the wild mushroom soup you will be having at supper.

I tell you this story to illustrate the difference between content and context. The content was my storylines, my fear, my images of myself and how other people might view me. In short, my circles of self-concern. The context was, and is, this shojo-no-shu, this practice of realization, the continuous questioning into and

opening to the space in which everything is taking place.

When students hear the phrase “open to context” they will often think of that as being a thing, rather like a place or a state of mind that is very defined. But the context we are referring to is not defined by any one thing. It is not a place or a certain kind of space and it is not a state of mind. It is not something that can be imagined or thought of or about. It is a coming and going of infinite ever-changing details, open to the ten directions. It has no edges or boundaries because it is your entire experience and of the Nature of Experiencing as Such. And even these are just the contents arising within various contexts which are all just contents within the ultimate context of Experiencing in itself. Even Suchness is just the radiance, the shining, of the luminosity of Awareness in itself.

And here I will just take a moment to remind you that when you hear phrases like “the luminosity of Awareness in itself”, this is not a another way of describing some manner of “god’. If that occurred to you, please recognize that that is just more of your own content that you’re adding to what is being said and open attention past it so that you can actually hear what I am saying. I am talking about the actuality of every experience, not something guiding experiences like some kind of Super Self. The idea of a deity or a higher reality is just another symptom of the fragmentation of experience that comes about by the contraction and fragmentation of attention. The Buddha Dharma is a cure for the illness, not another way of justifying the symptoms.

One symptom is a tendency to think of the practice of mindfulness and insight as something other than, or separate from, one’s life. In your life there can seem to be so many contexts, so many changing priorities. What is important seems to change all of the time and who you are, your sense of yourself as a self at any given moment, changes along with what’s important to you. Experiencing thus seems to be divided up into a collection of selves and their interactions: the work self, the family self, the me-and-my-friends self, the Zen student self and so on and so forth. All of these selves can seem to have different agendas that apparently have little to do with each other. But that is only a trick of the light, a slight of hand. What it is that is making it appear that way is self-image. And I’ll take a moment here to remind you that self-image is not some sort of entity, like your evil twin. It is a process of contraction.

When you release contraction, you are opening to context. To open to context, you need to release contraction. It’s actually very simple. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing at any moment, you can choose to open to openness. If you are not making that choice, you are not choosing. You are following the momentum of habitual habits and tendencies.

Wherever you are, whatever you are doing at any given moment, the bodymind is present. And the bodymind is present within a wider context - the space of the room you are in, or the street you are walking down — all around you there is open space, not a ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual’ space, but space that can be seen and felt bodily. If you are not feeling the body, or opening to seeing and hearing, what are you doing? Most of the time what you’ll find is that you’re following all of the thoughts and feelings that are associated with your circles of self-concern.

As Eihei Dogen zenji says in “The Question of Our Lives” or the Genjokoan as translated by Joshu Dainen roshi and Anzan Hoshin roshi:

“Sailing on the ocean with no land in sight, looking in the four directions, all you can see is the round

ocean. Actually, the ocean isn't round or square, it has myriad qualities like a palace, like an ornament. It only seems round as far as we can see at that brief time. View the ten thousand dharmas in this way.

Life itself is enlightenment itself and has many aspects but you can only see what your present understanding of practice allows. To appreciate the ten thousand dharmas, understand that oceans and mountains may seem round or square but there are details to still be seen and that there are whole world-systems in all directions.

Your immediate circles of concern are of no account. What is demonstrates itself right here beneath your feet and in a single drop of water."

When you are sitting zazen, this is not the time to ponder the foibles of what you think of as 'your life'. It's not the time to assess or compare yourself, to make plans, to think about situations you sometimes find yourself, to resolve an argument, to come to a decision or even to think about your practice of Zen. It's time that should be spent opening to context, not content. Not 'your' context, THE context. And that begins with practising the posture, feeling into the sensations of the bodymind, and opening to the sense fields as much as possible, as continuously as possible, throughout your sitting round. It's only half an hour, so really make use of the time.

If thoughts about content come up, don't finish the sentence. If feelings come up, instead of directing attention towards them, feel into the sensations of the bodymind sitting. Use the forms and practise them as fully as you can because they provide a context or environment of mindfulness for us. Or at least, they can if you practise them fully, instead of just as something you have to do when you're at the monastery. We have our body and breath to help us, and to show us how the mind is.

Open past the thought by releasing it. You do not have to complete the sentence. You do not have to erase what you have thought. You don't have to try to stop thinking. Just let go and open up. And then open further to and with this breath, this moment, this body and mind.

You're not going to learn anything new by regurgitating storylines, by shuffling your thoughts and feelings hoping to find the queen of hearts or the ace of spades, the one card in the deck that will win the game — whatever it is you think the game is. You're just cheating yourself out of the time you have to practice and Wake Up. The ability to know and to understand the presentation of Knowing that arises as experiences cannot be opened through thoughts and feelings. It is the teaching that is always present within every sound, every sight, every sensation.

You try to figure out the past, but you are only right here, right now, thinking about the past. You try to figure out the future, but you are only right here, right now, thinking about the future. Your thoughts seem to create a sense of movement, of something happening, but you haven't gone anywhere at all and there is nothing happening. You get "lost in thought", but you're not lost. You're sitting right here. See the wall? feel your hands in the mudra? Release attention into the colours and forms and sounds and sensations. Who and what you are is beyond confusion, clarity, delusion and enlightenment. Who you are is utterly ungraspable and to realize it all that you have to do is to release everything that you believe to be true, all of your understandings as well as your misunderstandings.

All content and all contexts arise within the context of Awareness in Itself. As the Roshi has often said: "If it's

closed, open around it." Which means to use every moment of recognizing contractions of attention to open to a wider context. But even that wider context is arising within a wider context and so he says, "If it is open, open further."